

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 8, 2019**

## **WHAT JESUS WANTS FOR CHRISTMAS (2)**

### **Matthew 25:1-13**

What does *Jesus* want for Christmas? After all, it is the celebration of *His* birth, *His* coming into our world to save us from our sins and to give us peace with God.

What Americans seem to want for Christmas is not hard to figure out. Advertisers bombard us with TV commercials telling us what we want and how this brand of vehicle or jewelry or smartphone or computer or appliances or clothes or ... you name it ... will make us happy. What millions of Americans seem to want more than anything else for Christmas is a good Black Friday deal. Or more than one. According to the National Retail Federation, more than 174 million Americans – more than 50 percent of us – went shopping sometime between Thanksgiving Day and Cyber Monday, whether online, in stores, or both.

One survey (by Slick Deals) found that we love Black Friday deals so much that many of us would skip out on Thanksgiving dinner with family just to get a really good deal. One in five Americans would eat only oatmeal for two weeks straight if it meant we could get a new, flat-screen TV for half price. For the same deal, nearly one in ten Americans would endure a year-long head cold. Are you kidding me? And for a free TV, one in ten Americans said they would happily be castaways on a deserted island, fending for themselves for a whole week, while another one in ten would put themselves under house arrest for a year. Are we crazy, or what? Apparently some of us are. (Source: James Emery White, *Church & Culture Blog*, Vol. 15, No. 94, December 2, 2019).

Christmas, in America, is largely defined by what we give to one another and what we get from one another. But what about Jesus? Have you thought about what Jesus wants for Christmas?

Last Sunday we focused on what Jesus said to the 1<sup>st</sup>-century church in Ephesus about recovering its first love. This first love for Him and for one another in the fellowship of believers – the love they had at first when their faith and devotion to Him were fresh and new – is what Jesus calls the church in Ephesus and us to rediscover.

Today I want to look at what Jesus wants for Christmas from a different angle, through the lens of this parable Jesus tells in Matthew 25 about 10 virgins who are part of a wedding party. I prefer to call them “bridesmaids.” I think it better reflects our cultural language. Jesus calls them “virgins,” which they were. More generally, though, we can think of them as unmarried girls or young women (we don’t know how old they may have been) who have been given the honor of accompanying the bride and her groom to their wedding feast.

Every culture has its own marriage customs. We have ours in America. Other cultures in the world today have different customs. What Jesus describes would have been familiar to Jews living in Palestine in His day. Here is some of what we know about the Jewish marriage

customs in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. The wedding was preceded by a betrothal that was more binding than our modern-day engagement. As we know from the dilemma Joseph faced when he learned that Mary was pregnant (Matthew 1:18ff.), it took divorce proceedings to end a betrothal, even though the marriage had not been consummated. When the time for the wedding came, the groom and his family and friends would go to the bride's home, where the wedding ceremony was usually held. Weddings often took place at night. But not always. After the wedding, everyone in the wedding party would go to the groom's home for the "marriage feast" (Matthew 25:10), which might go on for several days.

The 10 bridesmaids in the story were just that. They were members of the bride's party, waiting for the bridegroom to arrive for the wedding itself, after which, with their lamps (or torches) lit, they would light the way for the bride and groom and all the wedding guests from the bride's home to the groom's home, where the reception and celebration would take place.

One thing that is really interesting about this story is that the bride is not mentioned. Not even once. Don't be fooled by that. Don't think for a moment that this means the bride is not important. In the *story* the bride's role is assumed. We all know you can't have a wedding without a groom *and* a bride. You can't have a marriage without a husband *and* a wife. In our culture, of course, all the focus – or almost all, anyway – is on the bride. But not in Jesus' story. There is no indication that the bride is not eagerly awaiting the arrival of her groom. There is no indication that she is not ready for his arrival. Though she does not know just when he will arrive, she will not be caught off-guard when he comes.

So, in the story, there is the bridegroom and there are 10 bridesmaids, five of whom, says Jesus, are foolish, and five are wise. Some preachers and Bible scholars, such as Eugene Peterson in *The Message*, say that five of the bridesmaids are smart and the other five silly. Five are sensible and prudent. They are prepared for the possibility of a delay in the arrival of the groom and the beginning of the festivities. The other five are not prepared for a delay. They have not considered the contingencies. They are thrilled to be included in the wedding party, but they are so immersed in the moment that they have not adequately thought about what the future – even the immediate future – may hold. So they are not prepared for the unexpected delay in the coming of the groom.

The five smart bridesmaids – the wise ones – brought along extra jars of oil to light their lamps (or torches) in case of a delay. The other five – the silly ones – didn't think about the possibility of needing extra oil. They just assumed they had enough.

I had a preaching professor in seminary who was like the king of one-liners. Not jokes, but pithy sayings or axioms he thought were profound and worth passing on to the next generation of preachers. I suppose we're all like that. We all have sayings or phrases we use repeatedly in the hope that someone will remember them. One of my professor's favorite sayings was: "It's better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it." I don't know who said it first. It was probably not original with my professor. It has been attributed to novelist Franz Kafka, to someone named George Ellis, and probably others. Regardless of its origin, it is one of the lessons I still remember from three years in seminary! And it is clearly one of the lessons from Jesus' story here in Matthew 25.

It was better for the bridesmaids to have an extra jar of oil for their lamps, even if they might not need it, than to need it and not have it. But that is not the main point or purpose of this parable.

The main purpose of the parable, and the reason Jesus told this story, is to show that it is pointless to predict when Jesus will return (Douglas S. O'Donnell, *Matthew: All Authority in Heaven and on Earth*, 729). *It is pointless to predict when Jesus will return.* This parable, along with the parables in Matthew 24, teach that "Jesus will return later than expected, sooner than expected, and at a time unexpected." This truth ought to put an end to our speculation and guesswork about the second coming of Jesus once and for all. On at least two occasions, Jesus made it crystal clear that only God the Father knows the when of His second coming. In Matthew 24:36, Jesus says: "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." *Only the Father knows.* Then, in Acts 1:7, as Jesus is about to ascend into heaven, He says to His disciples: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by His own authority." The timing, as Eugene Peterson put it, "is the Father's business" (Acts 1:7, *MSG*). And yet, as has been the case throughout the whole history of the Christian church, people today still try to figure it all out and predict when it will happen. We've talked about some of those failed predictions before. The fact of the matter, as a pastor named Douglas O'Donnell says, is that "we have been given neither the authority nor the ability to decipher the timing of Christ's coming" (O'Donnell, 729).

*That Jesus is coming again* we affirm with our whole hearts and minds and conviction. *When Jesus is coming again* remains a mystery. Part of the purpose of Advent is to remind us that Jesus is coming again, even as we remember and celebrate His first coming into the world at Christmas. Advent serves to remind us of the promised coming again of Jesus in glory, so that, whenever He comes, He will not catch us unprepared, like the five foolish bridesmaids who ran out of oil and discovered, when they had gone out and gotten more oil for their lamps, that it was too late to be admitted to the party.

I haven't said it explicitly yet, but the bridegroom in the story is Jesus Himself. *Jesus* – the promised Messiah; our Savior and Lord; the eternal Son of God who took on our flesh and blood, who was born to Mary in a stable in Bethlehem, "because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7); who lived a sinless life and died on a Roman cross as our substitute, bearing our sin and shame; who rose again from the dead and ascended into heaven, from which we await His return to bring all of time and history to an end, and to bring the kingdom of God to complete fullness – *Jesus* is the groom for whom the wedding party, including the bride, is waiting. But His coming is delayed. He doesn't come when His family and friends expect Him. He is not on our time schedule.

Just as this parable teaches us that predicting when Jesus will return is pointless, it also teaches us to be prepared at all times, in all circumstances, in all seasons of life, for the promised return of our Savior and King. This is the one difference, the only stated difference, between the five bridesmaids who were wise and sensible, and the five who were not. One group was prepared; they had planned ahead for the unexpected. The other group was not

prepared. And when the unexpected happened, they hoped – maybe even expected – that the bridesmaids who were prepared would bail them out.

Maybe we could see the lesson of what happened to the five foolish bridesmaids in terms of an equation:

Too little preparation + Too much presumption = Disappointment. Rejection. Being left out.

If you don't make proper preparations and you presume too much on someone(s) to rescue you from your own irresponsibility, you're likely to end up in a place you would rather not be.

You may ask: Why didn't the five sensible bridesmaids share their oil with the other five? Wouldn't that have been the Christian thing to do? Aren't we supposed to share what we have with those who are in need? It is a tricky question. (Not a *trick* question, but a *tricky* one.) Yes, Jesus tells us to share with those in need. Yes, we are called to be generous and kind to others as followers of Jesus. But we also have a responsibility to do what the groom – what Jesus our Master and Commander, our Savior and Lord – has instructed us to do. The bridesmaids were all given a task as members of the wedding party. That five of them were not properly prepared does not mean the other five should jeopardize their ability to fulfill their role in the wedding celebration. O'Donnell points out that the ethical dilemma the five smart bridesmaids faced “is not such a dilemma if we realize (a) obedience to the groom is their first priority, and (b) if they gave away their oil they would, as they said, all run out of oil before their task of lighting the way was completed, and thus everyone would be in the dark and in danger” (O'Donnell, 732).

When we are able, and when it is appropriate, we are to “carry one another's burdens, and in doing so fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). Absolutely. But we are all responsible, the Scripture says, to carry our own load (Galatians 6:5).

There are some things in life that no one else can do for you. There are some things that you cannot do for another person, as much as you might like to. You cannot believe in Jesus for someone else. You cannot hope or expect to go to heaven on the basis of someone else's faith. It just doesn't work that way. Each of us has to believe personally. Each of us has to respond personally to the message of the gospel. Each of us has to trust in Jesus personally as Savior and Lord of our life. It doesn't matter how long you have been a church member or how many Christians you know or how many pastors or missionaries you have in your family tree. It doesn't matter what great saints your parents are (or were). You need to take hold of the oil of the gospel for yourself.

I hope you see that today. I don't want you or any of us to be left out of the feast when Jesus comes again.

What does Jesus want for Christmas? This parable teaches us that Jesus wants us – you – to be prepared for His coming again. The warning in the parable is that if you wait too long to get ready to meet Jesus, it will eventually be too late. If you wait too long to get right with God – if you put it off and say “I'll do it later” – it will eventually be too late. If you put off

doing something that Jesus wants you to do – maybe it is to humble yourself and apologize for something you’ve done to hurt someone, maybe it is to forgive someone who has hurt you, maybe it is to put the love you have in your heart for someone into words or action, maybe it is to get involved in a ministry in the church where you know there is a need – if you keep putting off what Jesus wants you to do in any of these things, it will eventually be too late.

What Jesus wants for Christmas is for you, me, all of us to get right with Him, to get right with one another, to get right and do right in all our relationships and responsibilities, to be about the Father’s business (as He was), and to live in a constant state of readiness for His return.

I don’t know when Jesus will return. No one does, except the Father. The key, as Dale Bruner has said, is to “have your Christian life so in order that when you *are* surprised [by His coming] you will be *ready*” (Quoted in O’Donnell, 735). Even if it is a surprise, and it *will* be, nothing will make Jesus happier than for all of us – for all His people – to be ready for Him when He comes again.

Contrary to what our culture wants us to believe, neither your Christmas nor your life is defined by how much you have, or by what you give or get for Christmas.

Jesus tells another story in Luke 12:15-21, this one about a rich man who had a great plan for retirement, but no plan for eternity. In terms of material things, he lacked nothing. He was successful. He was financially secure. He was highly respected. People looked up to him. But. But what? But Jesus said He was a fool in God’s eyes. Why? Because He was not ready for his appointment with death. He was not ready to meet God. He was not ready for Jesus to return.

Are you prepared? R U? What step(s) do you need to take to be ready when Jesus comes? Or when your days on earth come to an end? If there is something you need to do, do it today. If you’re not sure what you need to do, talk to me or to someone in our church family whose spiritual judgment you know and trust.

What does Jesus want for Christmas? He wants you to be ready for His coming again. Because *He. Is. Coming. Again.*

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.